

Interview with former 1st LT Jimmie H. Fulkerson, USMC, Charley Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, Vietnam. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 13 December 2005.

I'd like to talk to you about some of your impressions of March 1966 and the aftermath but first of all, where are you from?

Bloomfield, Missouri. That's my home of record.

When did you join the Marines?

I joined the Marines in 1961 as a sophomore in college in the PLC (Platoon Leaders Class). I was on a basketball scholarship at Arkansas College. Another guy, who is one of my business partners now . . . We had tried to work the summer before. I ended up in Illinois pitchin' peas. It was hard to get a job and that was the only way to make any spending I had that summer for the college year. I would have to save it during the summer. The recruiters came aboard and my friend came to me and said, "This is an ideal thing." He realized we could join the Marine Corps and we'd go to summer camp and they would pay us \$76 a month. We wouldn't have any place to spend it and so we could save all our money. And when we got out, we would be commissioned officers. Never having a commissioned officer in my entire family, I decided to go for it. So we did. We went for the physical. I passed; he flunked. I went to Vietnam; he went to law school.

Who got the better deal? So when did you actually go to Vietnam?

In 1965. We left the States in May of '65. We left as the 7th Marine Regiment. We were 17 days aboard ship, stopping in Hawaii and going to Okinawa. Our 1st Battalion stayed in Okinawa for some further training because we picked up a new battalion commander going over there—COL Kelly. He joined us just as soon as we hit Okinawa. We stayed and 3/7 immediately went up around Danang. And 2/7 remained reserve afloat. We left Okinawa the 1st of August and spent another 5 days aboard ship and landed at Chu Lai the 8th or 9th of August.

We weren't there very long until we went on our first operation. We were kind of a mop-up part for Operation Starlite, which was the first successful operation by United States forces in Vietnam. Our regimental commander, COL Oscar Peatross, actually had the 4th Marines and the 7th Marines. That operation yielded the first Medal of Honor (CPL Robert O'Malley) awarded in Vietnam for the Marine Corps.

What do you recall about the particular incident that took place on 28 March '66?

I was the XO at that time. I was the 3rd Platoon commander up until about 3 weeks before this. I became the XO and my platoon sergeant took over the 3rd Platoon. Bob Ingram was still the 3rd Platoon corpsman. When this operation started, I was on R&R in Hong Kong. I had just arrived back at Chu Lai. They left around 1 o'clock in the afternoon and I got in there just after they had departed in helicopters. Very soon after that, they began bringing in some casualties. So just after arriving back after 5 days of R&R in Hong Kong, I changed clothes, caught a supply helicopter, and landed at the battalion CP. Then I walked on up to where Charley Company was. I didn't get there until about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The actual incident with Bob had already taken place when I got there.

As XO, I took statements and so forth concerning the action. We were there all that night and the next morning. There is a tape on this. I don't know if you know that. CBS News had it the next day and we got a copy of it. The reporter is explaining the battle and "Suicide Charley."

I had asked Bob about the term "Suicide Charley" and how that company got that name.

They got the name at Guadalcanal. It was during a hard battle, kind of like what happened on March 28th. When the battle was over, one of the enlisted guys picked up one of the supply parachutes and put a skull and crossbones on it. Then he put Suicide Charley on it. That's why it's spelled Charley. He misspelled it. Then he raised the flag over the company and the name stuck. It has become one of the most decorated companies in the Marine Corps.

Is it true or is it folklore that that particular company picked all the assignments that appeared to be suicide?

I think that whenever the company went into action, they tried to uphold the tradition established at Guadalcanal rather than picking something that would have been suicide.

We were located at Chu Lai airbase and there was a river Song Trabong. On the other side of the river was a peninsula and that's where Starlite took place. Further south from there was My Lai, of [William] Calley's fame 4 or 5 years later.

Ben Goodwyn was a 1st lieutenant, the only 1st lieutenant company commander in the regiment. He talked the colonel into letting us establish a patrol base on the south side of the river. We got the approval and started patrolling this peninsula and the rest of the people set in around the Chu Lai air base.

We did get some relief every so often when they'd send one of the other companies out there for a couple of weeks and we'd come back to R&R. We were out there probably from the 1st of September thru June when we left. I'll tell you what you might want to do if you get a chance. A guy named Bing West wrote a book called *The Village*. That book was about "Suicide Charley." It gives you a little history.

When we left the States, we had a reinforced company of roughly 230 men. And when we went in on March 28th, we had 105 left. When we came out of there, there were 55 of us. I think we had 12 killed that day.

You say you were there in the late afternoon pretty much after everything had happened and you took the reports. Did you see Bob Ingram at that point?

No. He had already been evacuated.

But the statements you were getting at that time indicated that he had done something pretty remarkable.

Yes. The company commander and the XO of the battalion took over the writing of what turned out to be two Navy Crosses that day. I, as the XO of the company, got to write up some of the lesser awards. I should also say that there were five Silver Stars that day, too.

There were three great actions that day and we knew that the possibility of getting more than one Medal of Honor was very slim so we picked what we thought was the most heroic one and put it in for the Medal of Honor and the other two for the Navy Cross.

Was that Bob Ingram or someone else?

Bob Ingram was the one put in for the Medal of Honor and the other two were put in for the Navy Cross. Did you know that Bob was in LIFE magazine? There was a photo of him carrying a baby across the beach.

It was Operation Piranha, which was in late September of '65. It was a mop up of Operation Starlite in the same area. We discovered an underground hospital where they had all the North Vietnamese casualties from Starlite. Anyway, we had all these LIFE magazine people with us. A little baby had been hit by shrapnel or something from the airplanes that were prepping the beach before we landed. Bob picked up the baby and was carrying it back for better medical attention when a photographer snapped his picture. I don't know if you've ever seen it.

I've never seen the photograph but Bob seemed to me to be a bit embarrassed by the publicity he got from it.

That's Bob. I might have one I could send you. I think it was in one of the LIFE magazines from November of '65 but I don't know which one. It's all about this operation.

Anyway, when I landed back at Battalion on the 28th of March, the first person I ran into was the battalion commander and he looked like he'd seen a ghost.

Now, this was in March of '66?

Yes. As you report back casualties, you always said "Charley Three Actual." At that time, the platoon commander was my platoon sergeant and he had been killed on this operation. Anyway, the battalion commander had received word back that Charley Three Actual was one of the men killed in action. And he was still relating the dead man as being me.

Oh, I see. You're supposed to be dead and there you are--a ghost.

Yes. He told me that later. But when I got there, there was still plenty going on. Bob had been pulled back by Harvey Kappeler. From what they told me, Bob was unrecognizable because of the head wound and because he was bleeding so bad. When they unloaded the helicopter at Chu Lai, they put him on the dead pile because they thought he was dead. Someone heard him moaning and groaning and went and pulled him out of there. I don't know if you know that.

I had heard that but not from Bob.

No. He wouldn't tell you. But after this was over--2 weeks maybe--I got a letter from Bob. He had one of the nurses at the hospital wrote it for him. I wished I would have saved it; I've looked for it. He said, "I'm here at the hospital and I've got a trache in my throat and my arm is up in a sling and my leg is up in a sling. But I want you all to know that I'm still alive."

We really thought he would die, without question. And after that, we didn't know what happened. I didn't contact anybody I had served with until 1995.

So, that was really the last contact you had with him.

That's correct. In 1994 I was at the country club here one day and there was a gentleman who taught at Arkansas State. He had gone to Stanford University. Stanford was having a great football season. He walked up and was telling me about how Stanford had just won again.

I said, "I was in the Marines with a guy from Stanford. I haven't seen him since I got back from Vietnam."

He said, "Really. What's his name and what class did he graduate in?"

So I told him it was the class of '63. So, the next day he handed me a piece of paper and said, "Your friend runs a lawn care service in Reno, Nevada." And he gave me his phone number.

I thought about it and thought about it and said to myself, "It's time to get back with these guys." So I called him and almost put him in shock.

It just so happened that I had a business meeting in Reno in January and I told him that. He said, "I'll meet you at the airport."

I went with my four business partners and our wives. We flew out there and I just didn't know what to think. I didn't know how I was going to respond or anything. When we got off the airplane, there wasn't anybody there. I thought, "This is not what's supposed to happen." So we started walking down the corridor when all of a sudden I looked up and there he was. He was coming towards me. This gets emotional for me. He and I were lieutenants together.

Anyway, my business people and everybody said it was one of the most inspirational things they had ever seen. We just grabbed each other in the middle of the airport. At that point, I became determined that I was going to try to get back in touch with everybody I could.

My brother-in-law happened to be a computer whiz. I made a list of everybody I could think of who served with me. And when he came up with people, I'd make phone calls. I'd spend my nights calling and saying, "I'm looking for so and so. I wonder if there's any chance."

And most of the time they'd say, "No. We would like to help you but . . ." Anyway, I found Doc Ingram and the first words out of his mouth were, "What took you so long?"

We've got a place in Orange Beach, Alabama—a condo. And he's in Jacksonville. And we were going there for spring break in March of '95.

Down to your beach place?

Yes. Bob said, "Do you mind if I came over?"

And I said, "No. I'd love to have you."

We went to the airport in Pensacola, which is only 26 miles away. And there he was. I didn't hardly recognize him and he hardly recognized me after 30 something years.

We went for a walk on the beach, my wife, my daughter, Bob, and I. I couldn't stand it anymore so I asked Bob. I said, "Bob. What did you get for serving in Vietnam?"

He said, "I got the Silver Star for February the 8th."

I said, "I know that. I'm not talking about February the 8th. I'm talking about March 28th."

I had always assumed that the Medal of Honor we had put him in for had been downgraded to a Navy Cross and that's why I never heard anything about it.

He said, "I got the Purple Heart."

I said, "No. No. For heroism."

He said, "I didn't get anything but the Purple Heart."

I said, "Bob. Didn't you know that you were recommended for the Medal of Honor?"

He looked at me and said, "No. I had no idea."

His two children and his wife had no idea about anything that happened on March 28th.

He probably never said a word about it.

No. He didn't. And so I got hold of Ben Goodwyn, who was the company commander. We were planning a reunion at my house on Memorial Day of '95. That was our first reunion. We located LCOL Hochenauer who was MAJ Hochenauer at the time we served. He was the

XO of the battalion. He said, "We'll reconstruct this thing. We've got to. We have to find out what happened."

At the same time, I got in touch with Bob's senator, [Bob] Graham. The senator's military person said, "What you need to do before you go any further is to have Bob give you a letter and get it to the awards people. Give it to me and let them look in his DD-214 and all of his records to make sure that he has not received something that was never awarded. That's not uncommon for an award to be indicated in someone's records that was never actually awarded."

What was the letter that Bob was supposed to send?

Permission to look into his records. So that's what we did. The guy came back to me and said, "His records were looked at and all he ever received was the Purple Heart. Now you can proceed."

In the meantime, I was talking to Ben Goodwyn, Colonel Hochenauer, and Mrs. [Jeanne] Kirk, who was head of the Navy awards section.

I know Mrs. Kirk. She's retired now but I knew her when she was here.

She's a fine lady. So I talked to her and she said, "You know that it says that this has got to be recommended within 1 year of the action and awarded within 3 years."

I said, "Well, it was recommended within 1 year of the action but I don't know what happened to it."

So she told me how to proceed. In the meantime, I had also gotten Senator [Dale] Bumpers from Arkansas, who was a former Marine. And he wrote a letter to GEN [Charles] Krulak explaining things. I'm not doing this correct chronologically. It's been a while. But we reconstructed the events as to what happened. Ben Goodwyn is great at writing things. And Colonel Hockenour was doing the same thing. We reconstructed the events and how it happened. We got statements from our Memorial Day reunion from myself and the other platoon commanders in Charley Company stating that this is what happened. I asked Mrs. Kirk how long the process might take."

She said, "Well, I don't think you'll ever get it done but it will be a minimum of 3 years."

Boy, did she know her business. She walked me through this deal. We got her the statements.

GEN Krulak wrote Senator Bumpers and said, "I wish I could do this but Bob Ingram was in the Navy so it must go through the Chief of Naval Operations." At that time it was ADM Jay Johnson. So GEN Krulak forwarded it to ADM Johnson. Some of what I'm telling you may not be fact. But it's my recollection.

Anyway, ADM Johnson wrote me a letter saying that the paperwork had been presented to the awards board. Mrs. Kirk and I were in contact quite often by phone and she was keeping me updated as to what was going on.

The package went before the five Navy captains on the awards board and they came back saying the action was more befitting the Navy Cross. And that was their recommendation.

How did this happen? By backtracking, and this is speculation on our part, we only knew that back then the awards went on up to Division. But on March 28th, the 7th Marines was attached to the 3rd Marine Division. On April 1st, the 1st Marine Division headquarters landed in Vietnam from Camp Pendleton. So, originally having been attached to the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, we were taken from the 3rd, where we had been put while we were at Okinawa,

and put back with the 1st. At this stage of the Vietnam War, they were committing the 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions to Vietnam.

I don't know whether this had anything to do with happened with all this paperwork. But I can just see that all this paperwork was originally submitted to 3rd Marine Division. But now, all of a sudden, we were back with 1st Marine Division. And within 8 weeks of this happening, we were all gone. I don't know if someone had the paperwork and started to look for witnesses to corroborate some of this stuff, but I think someone got irritated and stuck it in a drawer and forgot about it. I hate to say that but. . .

That's probably what happened.

Someone would have pursued it at some level of an award. But I think with the mixup with the divisions. . .

So the Navy Awards Board recommended the Navy Cross. What happened next?

When I saw the letter the Navy board sent ADM Johnson, I saw that there was nothing informing GEN Krulak about this. He was not informed at all. We thought that since he was in the mix, he should have at least been informed of what was going on. Colonel Hochenauer is a bulldog. He's deceased now. I was discouraged and I said that I thought we'd just have to leave it alone. He said, "We're not giving up yet. I'll see my old buddies in the Marine Corps and make sure they inform GEN Krulak as to what's happened.

Anyway, I was talking to Mrs. Kirk. Some time before that, I had joined the 1st Marine Division Association. Anyway, Mrs. Kirk said, "If you just had one of the enlisted guys who was there. Everybody that's written about this is an officer and they're doing it because they said this is what happened. But none of them saw it."

As far as I'm concerned, this is where a little divine intervention came into play. I got a letter from one of the enlisted guys who served with me. He had seen my name in the book of new people who joined the 1st Marine Division Association. He said, "I don't know if you're the same one or not . . ."

I called him that night and he had been right in the middle of the action. I asked him, "Do you remember Doc Ingram?"

He said, "Yes. I can tell you exactly what happened."

So I called Mrs. Kirk and I said, "Guess what? Mrs. Kirk. We found an enlisted man who was down there with Doc Ingram. He was the one who pulled him back and gave him morphine."

This guy was instructed to call ADM Johnson, himself. And ADM Johnson said, "Don't worry about the prose and the commas, and all that stuff. You just write the best way you can exactly what happened that day."

So this is the enlisted man writing to ADM Johnson.

Correct. He was to write a statement as to what actually happened.

After this happened, we got some correspondence from ADM Johnson indicating that the awards package was being sent back to the Awards Board for further review. Well, I was pretty doggone sure he wasn't sending it back to be downgraded to a Silver Star.

Now this is the Chief of Naval Operations who has taken a personal interest in this.

Correct. ADM Jay Johnson. He's a fine man. I wish he had run for office. Anyway, when this happened, I was pretty sure something was going to happen. And it wasn't long after that that they came back and said the Medal of Honor was to be awarded. It was supposed to be awarded with a Marine general's award in January or February of '98 but, at the time, Bob's son had a horrible car wreck with head injuries.

Let me backtrack a little bit. Also, at the same time, my congressman, Congressman Berry, and Congressman McHale from Pennsylvania, who was a former Marine, got involved. We still had the deal of overcoming the problem concerning the award not being awarded within a 3-year period. Only Congress could remedy that situation. So they introduced it on the floor of Congress. Bob's congressman, Congresswoman Tilly Fowler from Florida, and the other two congressmen all got up and spoke well and in favor of the waiver. So it passed Congress. I have to say, that we did use some political people. Senator Graham also helped out but not nearly as much as Tilly Fowler. She was very helpful.

The Medal was to be awarded in a double ceremony with this Marine general. But because of the accident with Bob's son it had to be put off until July 10th of 1998. We all met in DC—the bunch of guys who served with him. We invited Mrs. Kirk and she said it was the first Medal of Honor ceremony she'd ever been invited to. And she came.

Well this really gives me some perspective on the whole thing. I heard it from Bob's point of view but he suggested I talk to you because you could fill me in on all the details.

Bob's family not knowing about what he did truly tells you something about Bob. They had no idea that their father and their husband had performed these feats.

There's something else I'd like to ask you and it has to do with the trip you all took back to Vietnam in 2000. Bob asked me to get your perspective on that trip and how you all decided to go.

We decided to go back because we wanted to bury some devils. And here's the best way I can put it. I wanted to go back because we'd had these guys killed. You were out there with them and you called in a medevac. You then put them on a helicopter and they were gone. There never was any closure. They just disappeared. They were either dead or whatever. There was a memorial service with Taps. You wondered what happened with their family. Some of the guys were very close to us. On February 8th, a sergeant who was one of my squad leaders, was killed. He was very close to Bob and me both. We wanted to go back and see and look at the ground and go back to where the village was and see if it really was like what we remembered. But the main thing was some type of closure. We had a memorial service while we were there. We started a school.

The next year my son went back with me and we walked the same trails we did when we patrolled there. But the first time for me, and I think for everybody, was to get that sense of closure. I wanted to see what some of these places looked like now, those places where our friends were killed. I think it helped all of us tremendously. We got to say goodbye, even though it was 35 years later.

What did building the school mean to you?

We landed by helicopter on March 28, 1966. We had our maps and we found it in 2000. We went and talked to the village chief and asked if he remembered what happened that March 28th and he said yes, he remembered. Then we apologized for any destruction of their village

that we might have caused that day. They said, “No. You don’t owe us any apologies. We were glad to see you. The North Vietnamese were here taking our food and raping our women. And we were actually glad that you came.”

Actually, it was Ben Goodwyn who was asking the questions for us. He asked the village chief what we could do for them to honor those who were killed—our people and their people. The village chief said that the best thing would be a school. If they could just have a school there. They had to take their small children—1st, 2nd, and 3rd graders—to the next village and pay that village in order to educate them. We asked what they thought it would cost to build a school. They said \$3,000, I believe.

So we came up with \$3,000 and gave it to them. And we said we hoped they could build a monument and a school. We never thought they would build a school. We came back the next year—and that’s one of reasons we did—and they had built a school. Not only did they spend our \$3,000 but they somehow borrowed another \$800 or so through the government. You have to understand that at that time the annual income for a Vietnamese was about \$375. So that should put the school in more perspective.

What do you remember about going back and actually seeing the school?

These villagers just went ballistic when they saw us. When we walked in, it was just phenomenal. They had constructed the school almost exactly where the action with Bob took place at the edge of the village. While we were there, they went and got the main man in that district and brought him to the school. They had electricity and a little fan in it. And he went through a ceremony with us and thanked us profusely for what we had done.

And the schoolteacher and the kids were also there. We asked what she needed and she said a desk and enough money to build a fence and put concrete on their playground and some playground stuff so when it was the rainy season, the kids could still go outside.

So we got enough money to pay off their debt and buy the teacher a desk. And that’s the last contact we’ve had with them. But it was all worth it. We were going to go back next spring. Some people wanted to on the 40th anniversary. But not in this day in time, especially with this bird flu out there. So we’ve canceled all that.

I want to thank you so much for spending time with me this afternoon. I really appreciate it.

I hope I was somewhat helpful.

You certainly were and the whole story now makes sense.

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